

The Future of Basic Writing

George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk

ABSTRACT: In this article, we assess the status of basic writing early in the twenty-first century. Beginning with a discussion of the attacks on BW that intensified during the 1990s and early 2000s—attacks that originated from such diverse sources as state legislatures, university officials, and BW scholars themselves—we go on to summarize the responses to these attacks in the form of modified BW programs and practices. What does the future hold for basic writing and basic writers? There are no clear answers to this question. But the recent influx of increasing numbers of non-traditional students to the nation's colleges and universities indicates that the need for basic writing and other compensatory programs will increase substantially in the years to come. And research suggests that, in the long run, providing access to higher education along with appropriate forms of academic support such as basic writing pays off for individuals and for society.

KEYWORDS: basic writing; remediation; higher education; educational standards; under-prepared students; educational opportunity

In 2010, the story of basic writing is far from resolved. The global economic downturn that began in 2008 echoes on a huge scale the New York City financial crisis that eviscerated BW programs in the City University of New York in the mid-1970s. Mina Shaughnessy, speaking at the 1976 Conference of the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors (CAWS) to those who had lived through budget cuts and retrenchments, struggled to find a way of seeing something good come of such hardship. She found some consolation in the solidarity that was forged during these shared struggles:

I cannot imagine a group of teachers who have ever had more to say to one another. It is a special fraternity joined not only by our

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common purposes and problems as teachers but by our having come to know, through our students, what it means to be an outsider in academia. Whatever our individual political persuasions, we have been pedagogically radicalized by our experience. . . .

Such changes, I would say, are indestructible, wherever we go from here. (“The Miserable Truth” 269)

Basic writing came back from that scene of devastation, and it may once again in a new century, but not as a unified project. Coherence, if it ever exists in academic research or its application, is a property of beginnings. Maturity breeds complexity. What research has disclosed about basic writing—whether as a teaching project, a population of students taught, or a context for such teaching and learning—is that its incarnations differ from one site and time to the next.

Recognizing that basic writing will continue to evolve in the years ahead, in this article we will assess the current situation and suggest some possible future directions for the field. In order to contextualize this discussion, we will first review the political climate that has led us to this point.

POLITICAL PORTENTS

Questioning the Value of Remediation

Throughout the 1990s, the debate over whether BW students had any business being in college was reopened with a vengeance. An early warning shot came in the form of a “Point of View” piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 1991. Marc Tucker, then president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, effectively made his point with his title: “Many U.S. Colleges Are Really Inefficient and High-Priced Secondary Schools.” His elaboration of the point basically outlines a program that would be followed throughout the decade:

Remediation is a poor substitute for prevention. Non-existent standards are a part of the problem, not the solution. Colleges that take whomever they can get in order to fill seats are in no position to complain about the schools. If some part of the current capacity of higher education has to be shut down if we institute appropriate standards, then so be it—if the funds released can be made available

to the schools to do the job properly the first time. If colleges want to keep that money to do what they should have been doing all along—both to help the beleaguered schools and to run their own part of the “secondary” system effectively—then legislatures and the federal government should be ready to listen. It is time to be honest about these issues and to do something about them.

Some of the politically charged attacks against basic writing that surfaced in the 1990s were inspired by the publication of James Traub’s *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College* (1994), a journalistic account of the trials and tribulations of BW students and teachers at CUNY’s City College, one that calls the whole enterprise into question. Largely anecdotal, the book purports to let its readers draw their own conclusions, but its effect is to make the critical question it begins with rhetorical: “How powerful are our institutions in the face of economic and cultural forces that now perpetuate inner-city poverty?” (5). As Nathan Glazer would write in an approving review of the book (but one with seams of sympathy for City College and its students), “Remedial education, even the best kind, can only do so much.” Why? Because, though both the commitment of the students and the school’s ability to match it once seemed so high, “Now the students have changed because the city has changed, and because the society has changed. It has not been a change to which many institutions have successfully adapted” (41).

As Glazer’s comment suggested, the issues raised rippled well beyond one college in New York City—and one book, albeit one named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. For a variety of reasons—social and demographic changes, increasing numbers of high school students enrolling in college (see Otte, “High Schools as Crucibles of College Prep”), and ongoing efforts to democratize and diversify higher education—remediation had become a vast industry. Attention to it was growing as both costs and enrollments in higher education grew. This was particularly true at the time of Traub’s book, a period of significant economic downturn, which led to a budget crisis for CUNY and City College. Especially in a difficult economic climate, the BW enterprise was ripe for downsizing. As Mary Soliday later showed in *The Politics of Remediation* (2002), the representations of the actual extent of remediation varied considerably: “Estimates on the numbers of institutions that offered remediation in the ’90s range from 40 to 81 percent” (124). The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimated that, at the beginning of the 1990s, a third of

college students took at least one remedial course; by the end of the decade, that number was 28 percent, with about three-quarters of all post-secondary institutions offering such courses. Significantly, the one area of decline was “remedial writing”: institutions offering such courses fell from 71 percent to 68 percent from 1995 to 2000 (Parsad and Lewis).

What matters more than the exact numbers is what people made of them. There could be numerous explanations for the prevalence of remedial college courses at the end of the twentieth century: high schools were not doing their job, assessments were too strict or unreliable, culturally different students were resistant to assimilation, and so on. Of all the explanations, one seemed to have particular power for those looking at the remedial enterprise from the outside: the problem was to be found in the high schools, which were ripe for reform. Public dissatisfaction with the high schools led to demands for higher standards and more testing. By the end of the decade, legislatively mandated exit exams would be imposed for public high schools in most states, and in some states (California, New York, and Virginia, for example) colleges were required to help high schools meet the new standards (Otte, “High Schools as Crucibles of College Prep”).

Basic writing, as a field, had some complicity in the conclusion that the high schools were not doing their job since it had, from the beginning, cast students as “underprepared.” From this perspective, basic writing was the place to address the problems of a special population in need of special support. In one of the many defenses of BW in the 1990s (this one from 1995), Mary Sheridan-Rabideau and Gordon Brossel argued, “Basic writing classrooms . . . provide safe spaces where students are encouraged to address their writing difficulties within a supportive environment” (24). In explaining why basic writers needed such “safe spaces,” these authors reasoned, “Unfamiliar with and underprepared for fulfilling the university’s writing expectations, basic writers are often exploring writing practices that more experienced writers may already be quite comfortable with” (23–24).

But that is also a milder way of stating a conclusion that Shaughnessy had come to a couple of decades before when she refused to validate a type of education that had failed to properly educate millions of young adults. In *Errors and Expectations*, she expressed her wish that programs such as the one she established and ran would help to “close the shocking gaps in training between the poor and the affluent” (291). She and those who followed her lead in attempting to compensate for these gaps—especially in the absence of the needed reforms—eventually came in for critique. For example, in

“The ‘Birth’ of Basic Writing” (an expanded version of “Discouraging Basic Writing,” which appeared as the first chapter of *Representing the “Other”* [Horner and Lu]), Bruce Horner noted that rising to such pedagogical challenges in the absence of called-for social changes could actually entrench rather than address the inequities Shaughnessy inveighed against: “Unfortunately, pedagogies labeled as ‘effective’ at producing results within the constraints of degrading material conditions work in tandem with such reports and protests to legitimize those conditions—conditions of crisis that seem somehow never to be relieved” (Horner and Lu 27).

Real World Repercussions

Horner’s analysis effectively explains as well as excoriates the way, in the 1990s, politicians seemed concerned less with relieving “the constraints of degrading material conditions” than with reducing the cost of programs that had been attacked as ineffective. Assuming an increasingly activist stance toward postsecondary “remediation,” state legislatures across the country began to pass laws limiting the availability of remedial programs. Different states have taken different approaches to “the remediation problem,” but a common thread is to force students judged to need remediation in reading, writing, or mathematics into community colleges or adult education programs rather than admitting them to baccalaureate programs in four-year schools (Greene and McAlexander 15).

At the same time that states were placing restrictions on remediation, colleges and universities interested in raising their standards and status began to look critically at their entrance requirements, student retention rates, and progress toward the all-important baccalaureate degree. They soon saw that students initially classified as basic writers had a negative effect on these numbers—coming in with lower placement scores and often taking longer to graduate. The 1999 decision by CUNY’s Board of Trustees to end open admissions at its four-year colleges, sending all students needing remediation to its community colleges, was an early example of this trend. Citing similar concerns about the erosion of standards, the Board of Trustees of the California State University system (the middle tier of that state’s system, which also includes community colleges and research universities) ruled in the late 1990s that students must complete all remediation in English and mathematics within one year (Goen-Salter 83).

For those concerned with basic writing and basic writers, there was worse to come. In the new millennium, several of the oldest and most

highly esteemed open admissions units attached to universities were phased out. In 2003, the University of Cincinnati (UC) decided to do away with University College, a two-year open admissions unit at the main campus. For decades, University College had offered developmental work within a supportive environment to underprepared students with the goal of helping them make the transition to a regular baccalaureate program at the University. Michelle Gibson and Deborah T. Meem, professors at the University of Cincinnati who taught basic writing at University College for many years, explain the rationale behind the decision to eliminate University College: “The goal of our university has been to remove nearly all underprepared students from the main campus’s degree-granting units in order to bolster UC’s academic ratings in such publications as *US News and World Report*” (64). In the summer of 2009, the University of Cincinnati announced that, beginning in 2010, the main campus will admit only “those students who meet the university’s academic success criteria” (Hand). Students who seem less likely to “succeed” will be referred to the university’s regional campuses or to programs at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College.

In 2005, the Regents of the University of Minnesota made a similar move, voting to eliminate the University’s General College, which had a distinguished history of offering basic writing and other support services to underprepared students. This decision, like the one at Cincinnati, was motivated by the institution’s desire to move into the top tier of research universities. Administrators at the University of Minnesota pointed out that students who began in General College took much longer to graduate, thus increasing the average time to attain the baccalaureate degree, one of the standards used to assess the quality of research universities (University of Minnesota). As of 2009, students who formerly would have entered the General College could take courses in the College of Education and Human Development, but the University’s goal is eventually to reduce the number of students in need of remedial work by 60 percent (Greene and McAlexander 16).

Although a baccalaureate degree has become an increasingly important credential in today’s society, access to basic writing and other compensatory programs for underprepared students is not a high priority for state legislators and university officials. And at the end of the 1990s, basic writing came under fire from within as well as from without.

BASIC WRITING UNDER SIEGE FROM WITHIN

Arguing for Abolition

As legislators and university officials were questioning remedial efforts such as basic writing, scholars within the field were also taking a close look at BW programs and practices. This scrutiny became especially intense in the 1990s, with some saying that the whole structure of tracking and teaching BW students was unacceptable and needed to be jettisoned. The most dramatic expression of this was Ira Shor's "Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality" (1997). Arguing that regular composition, instituted at Harvard in the last decade of the nineteenth century to control and gentrify a rising middle class, was itself a mechanism of "containment," Shor argued that basic writing was essentially more of the same:

BW has added an extra sorting-out gate in front of the comp gate, a curricular mechanism to secure unequal power relations in yet another age of instability, the protest years of the 1960s and after. To help secure the status quo against democratic change in school and society, a BW language policy producing an extra layer of control was apparently needed to discipline students in an undisciplined age. At the time of BW's explosive birth, the system was under siege by mass demands for equality, access, and cultural democracy. Since then, the economy, short in graduate labor until about 1970, has been unable to absorb the educated workers produced by higher education in the past 25 years. In this scenario, BW has helped to slow the output of college graduates. BW, in sum, has functioned inside the larger saga of American society; it has been part of the undemocratic tracking system pervading American mass education, an added layer of linguistic control to help manage some disturbing economic and political conditions on campus and off. (92-93)

Even in its strong words (like the "apartheid" of the title), Shor's analysis was essentially an elaboration of David Bartholomae's claim, in his 1992 Conference on Basic Writing keynote address, that BW was guilty of "confirming existing patterns of power and authority, reproducing the hierarchies we had meant to question and overthrow" ("The Tidy House" 18). Shor's claims were rebutted by Karen Greenberg ("Response"), Terry Collins ("Response"), and Deborah Mutnick ("The Strategic Value of Basic Writing").

In fact, the debate overshadowed other BW research throughout the decade and into the next. The whole Spring 2000 issue of *JBW* was essentially devoted to the debate, and even Gerri McNenny's collection *Mainstreaming Basic Writers* (2001) is less about mainstreaming than it is about the debate over mainstreaming.

The dissensus was evidence of a turning point in the history of basic writing. Controversies had always existed in the field, but in the past they had focused on how best to proceed with BW instruction, not on whether to do so. The 1990s changed that irrevocably. Only part of this critique was mounted by those present at the creation like Bartholomae and Shor. There was also a generational shift producing scholars who argued for a wholesale rethinking of basic writing, not as a logical curricular offering but as a social, historical, and, perhaps now, outdated construction. The concerns of this new generation were effectively articulated by two prominent voices, Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu. In their introduction to *Representing the "Other": Basic Writers and the Teaching of Writing* (1999), they wrote:

We see ourselves as part of a generation of compositionists trained in the late 1980s whose experience of basic writing was shaped by the canonical reception of certain texts on basic writing in graduate programs and professional journals. The gap between official accounts of basic writing and our day-to-day experience as writing teachers and students resulted in a dissatisfaction with what we saw as the occlusion of attention from the social struggle and change involved in the teaching and learning of basic writing, and representations of the "problems" of basic writers and basic writing in ways that risked perpetuating their marginal position in higher education. (xiv)

Distinguishing between "basic writing" and "the specific sociopolitical and intellectual contexts of both the production and reception of a discourse dominating the field ('Basic Writing')" (xi) allowed Horner and Lu to distinguish between the "heterogeneity of basic writing" and the "hegemonic position of Basic Writing" (xii), between the field's voices of dissent and complexity on the one hand and BW as the Establishment on the other.

The Great Unraveling

With or without "cultural materialist" critique and whether upper-cased or not, basic writing was looking far from hegemonic as the 1990s

came to an end. This was not just due to debates over its abolition but to its actually being abolished or downsized, as attested to in accounts like Gail Stygall's 1999 article "Unraveling at Both Ends: Anti-Undergraduate Education, Anti-Affirmative Action, and Basic Writing at Research Schools." Stygall, like Gibson and Meem, Greene and McAlexander, and Soliday, recounted a political as well as a politicized deconstruction in which forces from within the institution joined with forces from without to bring basic writing down.

Horner and Lu were by no means oblivious to the consequences for BW students and teachers of such unraveling. In "Some Afterwords: Intersections and Divergences," the piece concluding *Representing the "Other,"* Horner writes:

Certainly our insistence on the historicity of Basic Writing challenges the construction of "basic writing" into an objective, unified, and stable entity, represented as a "course," "student," or "writing." To teachers concerned with their own and their students' immediate institutional survival, however, any suggestions that "basic writing" is a construction may seem an elitist gesture from those situated to afford engagement in fine theoretical distinctions, at best an irresponsible admission, but in any event likely to provide additional fodder to those on the New Right attacking basic writing programs, teachers, and students. For if "basic" writing does not signify a "real" phenomenon, a concrete body of students with self-evident needs that must be met, then one may legitimately question whether or not to preserve basic writing programs. Similarly, given existing power relations in the United States, any emphasis on the political import of the teaching of basic writing may well seem to threaten to encourage those in positions of dominance to exercise that dominance more conclusively by putting an end to basic writing programs. Even teachers who agree that representations of basic writing are constructs that have functions strategically but problematically may well argue that such theoretical critiques are not worth the immediate, perhaps long-term, and significant material losses that such critiques may cost. (191-92)

In light of this litany of objections, the recourse Horner and Lu offer—at least in the capsule form provided in the introduction to *Representing the "Other"*—may seem small consolation: "By recognizing the heterogeneity of

basic writing at any given time and place, teachers can draw on the full range of positions and forces—dominant, alternative, and oppositional as well as residual or emergent—with some of which we might align ourselves and with all of which we must contend” (xiii). Given their own insistent focus on basic writing’s “marginal position in higher education,” this recognition seems to call for a remarkable resourcefulness from a harried and insecure cadre of largely part-time instructors and out-on-a-limb administrators.

Around the turn of the century, it began to seem that any efforts by teachers and administrators (no matter how resourceful they might be) to improve or even preserve their basic writing programs would be doomed to failure. Debates were roiling, programs closing. But in the midst of this disarray, two of the most significant testaments to the importance of basic writing since *Errors and Expectations* were published, reporting on research at CUNY’s City College—the same site where Shaughnessy had done her groundbreaking work. Marilyn Sternglass’s *Time to Know Them* (1997) gave compelling evidence of basic writers’ ability to succeed, using the most carefully collected longitudinal evidence ever seen in BW research. Although this research demonstrated that educational opportunity coupled with academic support could transform students’ lives, ultimately it didn’t seem to matter much. The elimination of basic writing from City College was imminent. By the time Mary Soliday’s *Politics of Remediation* (2002) was published, the erasure of basic writing at that college was an accomplished fact, despite the success of Soliday and Gleason’s own mainstreaming experiment there.

BASIC WRITING REVISED

Public Policy and Basic Writing

Yet as basic writing was being phased out at many four-year colleges, BW programs were being preserved, or even transformed, at other institutions. One place where questions about the future of basic writing were raised was in the special Fall 2006 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, which celebrated the publication of the journal’s twenty-fifth volume. It seems significant, in light of CUNY’s decision to shift BW into the community colleges, that by this time in the journal’s history the editors were both community college professors—Bonne August and Rebecca Mlynarczyk. In 2007, when August stepped down, Hope Parisi, another community college professor, became coeditor.

In the special issue of 2006, the editors asked some of the leaders of the field to analyze the current state of basic writing. In their contribution titled “In the Here and Now: Public Policy and Basic Writing,” Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington assert that BW researchers must contend with “three themes that run through contemporary discussion of education generally, and writing specifically: that students aren’t prepared for college or work during their high school years; that this lack of preparation is costing institutions and, directly or indirectly, taxpayers; and that these first two problems are rooted in a system that requires outside agents to come in and repair it” (30). They propose countering these three themes with carefully crafted rhetoric, empirical data, and a resolve to reach those beyond as well as within the academy: “. . . we need to *make* the decisions, *do* the research, and *use* the data we collect in strategic ways. It’s time to move beyond academic discussion. We need to take our perspectives and our programs public: it’s time to take data in hand, with rhetorical fierceness” (45). If this seems utopian, Adler-Kassner and Harrington would stress that it is nevertheless necessary given how the problem of the “underprepared” student is currently framed: “Unless compositionists of all stripes—those teaching basic writing, those who work with first-year composition and graduate students—are able to shift the direction of this discussion, it will have significant and deleterious effects on our work, affecting everything from the students who sit in our classes to the lessons that we design” (30).

But such urgency does not assure that what is needed is also what is possible. At this point, says Laura Gray-Rosendale (also writing in the special 2006 issue of *JBW*), the field has become so context-focused, so concerned with local/institutional circumstances and individual cases that

we may have lost some of our ability to describe relevant institutional, political, and social trends in broader, general terms within basic writing scholarship. . . . While focusing on the minute specifics of basic writers’ situations has allowed us to gather a great deal of crucial local knowledge, focusing so much of our energies on these projects may leave us in danger of abandoning the important national and global concerns that have defined our discipline for many years and have been fundamental to making successful arguments on behalf of our students. (“Back to the Future” 20)

Recent developments concerning basic writing have certainly confirmed the point made by the authors of these articles: BW professionals

need to communicate more effectively with college administrators, politicians, and the general public about what they do in basic writing and why these endeavors are worthy of continued support. In order to do this, they need to publicize how BW programs have evolved to meet students' (and society's) changing needs. In introducing the special issue of 2006, Mlynarczyk and August emphasize the ways in which this evolution was already happening: "In response to legislative mandates banning 'remediation' from four-year institutions, faculty committees are developing creative and academically sound programs to offer students BW support as well as academic credit" ("Editors' Column" 1). Two such programs were featured in the issue. Mark McBeth describes a new approach to basic writing developed at CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice that offers students a rich academic experience while at the same time helping them to pass the ACT exam required for exit from the course. In "Redefining Literacy as a Social Practice," Shannon Carter details the comprehensive approach developed at her institution, Texas A&M University at Commerce, in which BW students begin by analyzing a discourse they know well and gradually apply what they have learned to understand the relatively unfamiliar features of academic discourse.

Alternative Program Structures

The changing structures of basic writing programs are summarized in William Lalicker's "A Basic Introduction to Basic Writing Program Structures" (1999). In this report based on a survey Lalicker conducted on the Writing Program Administrators (WPA) listserv, he groups existing BW programs into six broad categories. The first, which he terms the "baseline" or "prerequisite model," is the traditional noncredit "skills" course in which basic writing is viewed as a prerequisite to be completed before taking "college-level" composition. Although some programs using this model have adopted more progressive pedagogies and practices, the prerequisite model often causes resentment among students, who fail to see the relevance of these required noncredit courses. The five alternatives listed by Lalicker seek to avoid this problematic aspect of the prerequisite model by integrating BW instruction more completely into regular college course structures—often granting some academic credit for this work. In the stretch model (such as the well-known approach used at Arizona State University), BW students are given two semesters to complete a regular one-semester composition course (see Glau, "Stretch at 10," "The 'Stretch Program'"). In the studio model first

developed at the University of South Carolina, basic writers take regular first-year composition along with a required studio workshop in which they receive additional help with their writing (see Grego and Thompson). Other colleges have opted for directed self-placement. With this model, entering students are advised of the availability of basic writing courses and left to make their own decision as to whether to take BW or regular composition (see Royer and Gilles, "Basic Writing and Directed Self-Placement," *Directed Self-Placement*). A fourth alternative is the intensive model in which students who are judged to need basic writing are assigned to a composition course in which students meet for more hours than required for regular composition and receive extra support (see Seagall). The intensive model, which is similar to the studio approach in many respects, differs from it in that students remain with the same teacher and student group for all the required hours of instruction whereas with the studio model students from several different composition classes attend the same studio session. The final category listed by Lalicker is mainstreaming. Strictly speaking, this option does away with BW, placing all students in regular composition. However, Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason, directors of a successful mainstreaming project at CUNY's City College, point out that teachers who are not trained in teaching basic writing need extra resources and support in the form of professional development workshops, mentoring programs, and tutoring services for students. In effect, according to Soliday and Gleason, if mainstreaming is to succeed, then it must offer an enriched approach to teaching composition.

Other models for offering basic writing that are not mentioned in Lalicker's report include service learning, WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) and WID (Writing in the Disciplines), and learning communities. In service-learning programs, students perform community service, which becomes the basis for their academic learning and reflection. In recent years, basic writing programs at many institutions have implemented courses that include a community service component. In *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition* (2000), Thomas Deans states that, at its best, service learning is "a pedagogy of action and reflection, one that centers on a dialectic between community outreach and academic inquiry" (2). Based on his analysis of a variety of service-learning projects, Deans has developed a taxonomy of three paradigms that operate in these courses: (1) writing *about* the community (in which students use their community involvement as a subject to think and write about for their academic course), (2) writing *with* the community (in which students, professors, and community members collaborate in writing about issues and concerns relevant to that community), and (3) writing *for*

the community (in which students create written products for the community such as flyers or newsletter articles) (15–20).

The response to service learning from participants—teachers, students, and community members—has, on the whole, been positive (Deans 2), but descriptions of service learning in basic writing classes also allude to possible pitfalls. For example, in “Servant Class: Basic Writers and Service Learning,” Don J. Kraemer takes a critical look at “the tensions and contradictions between the process-oriented, learning-centered pedagogy” usually associated with BW courses and “the product-based, performance-centered moment” emphasized in writing-for-the-community projects (92). After an analysis of his students’ experiences in a writing-for project, Kraemer concludes: “When writing for the community, students do good—but very little seeking, describing, naming, acting, and changing” (108). These activities, which help students develop their rhetorical abilities, are, in Kraemer’s view, more important goals for basic writing.

Even in the writing-about version of service learning, in which students use their community service to analyze a social issue, problems can arise if students do not feel personally invested in their service experience. In an article analyzing a qualitative research project focused on a basic writing course requiring students to tutor in a local elementary school, Nancy Pine found that only one student—the one who had elected to take this course because of the tutoring component—chose to include his tutoring experiences as part of the mix of sources for the required research essay. While acknowledging the complexities involved in helping basic writers to acquire academic literacy through analyzing their service experiences, Pine believes that “in writing-about composition service learning classes, it is crucial that connections between the service and course content be made explicit by and for students in multiple forms of writing and speaking” (53). Service learning has the potential to make coursework in basic writing more meaningful, but it requires careful planning of program structures and pedagogies.

When basic writing is offered as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) or Writing in the Disciplines (WID), the concern for helping students become better writers moves beyond “remedial” programs and into mainstream courses. With WAC and WID, professors in a variety of disciplines work to encourage the development of students’ academic literacies (see Bazerman et al. for a comprehensive discussion of these approaches). While it is certainly desirable for students placed in BW to receive writing support in their mainstream classes, it may be problematic if WAC or WID is seen as a replacement for basic writing. Faculty in disciplines other than English

may lack the desire, the fundamental knowledge of BW theory and practice, or the time needed to help basic writers become successful writers in their subject areas.

Another way of expanding the responsibility for teaching basic writing beyond the confines of the English department is seen in the growing trend toward learning community (LC) programs for students with BW placement. First developed in the 1920s and 1930s as enrichment programs for the most academically prepared students (Gabelnick et al.), in recent years learning community programs have also proved effective for students classified as basic or ESL writers. The rationale behind learning communities is to “purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or coursework so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students” (Gabelnick et al. 5). In learning community programs for basic writers, a cohort of students takes a BW course and one or more courses in other disciplines. Faculty members in the learning community collaborate to design and implement a curriculum that will help students see the interconnections between ideas from the different courses, sometimes developing joint syllabi and shared assignments.

Like other alternative approaches to basic writing, learning community programs have potential problems—most notably the “hyper-bonding” that sometimes occurs when students in the same learning cohort “gang up” to engage in disruptive classroom behavior or to sabotage an instructor or a project (“The Impact”). These negative behaviors are the exception, however, rather than the rule. For the most part, BW students who participate in learning communities are more engaged in their learning and have higher retention rates in the course and in the college, higher graduation rates, and higher grades than control groups of basic writers who do not have this experience (see Darabi, Heaney, Mlynarczyk and Babbitt for results at different colleges). Such positive, statistically significant outcomes are certainly important for the students and faculty participating in these programs. Perhaps equally important in this data-driven environment, they offer a way to convince college administrators and state legislators of the value of well-designed approaches to basic writing. Rachele Darabi explains:

Positioning basic writing courses within learning communities may lead not only to positive outcomes like greater student success but also relief of some of the tensions surrounding remediation at the university level. By increasing students’ opportunities to succeed,

universities can spotlight these successes rather than being defined by failures, allowing faculty and students alike to focus their attention on learning. (71)

The recent development of new models for providing basic writing instruction at many U.S. colleges is a hopeful sign. Program directors and professors across the country are using what they have learned about basic writing over the years to design innovative programs that better meet students' needs while also conforming to the requirements imposed by politicians or university administrators. For the most part, these redesigned programs are an improvement on the old prerequisite model of remediation, where students first had to complete basic writing to certify that they were ready for "college-level writing." Instead, students are developing the academic literacies needed for college coursework while actually taking "college-level" courses. Whether such programs will survive in the face of mounting pressure to cut costs and raise "standards" in higher education remains to be seen.

BASIC WRITING FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Anticipating the Need

In discussing the fate of basic writing in the years to come, one question that arises is whether the need for this type of support at the college level will decrease, increase, or remain relatively stable. Several indicators suggest that the need will increase substantially. Since the 1990s, many states' efforts have focused on eliminating the need for "remediation" in higher education. But the success of these efforts has been negligible. In fall 1995, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) surveyed two- and four-year institutions. Of those that offered remedial courses, about 47 percent reported that the number of students enrolled in these courses had remained about the same over the past five years. For 39 percent of the institutions, the number had increased. Only 14 percent of the schools surveyed said the number had declined (Parsad and Lewis).

The experiences of the California State University system illustrate the difficulty of trying to reduce the need for remediation in higher education. In a *JBW* article titled "Critiquing the Need to Eliminate Remediation: Lessons from San Francisco State" (2008), Sugie Goen-Salter takes a historical approach. Beginning in the 1980s when about 42 percent of entering students

were judged to be in need of remediation by the system's English placement test, the California Postsecondary Education Commission began to develop complex and expensive approaches to try to reduce, and eventually eliminate, the need for English remediation at the Cal State campuses (Goen-Salter 81). These measures have included many well-designed and well-implemented programs such as requiring that all students applying to the system take four years of English in high school, tightening the requirements of teacher education programs in the state, developing innovative partnerships between high school and college teachers, and inviting eleventh graders from under-represented minorities to take a mock placement test and attend Saturday workshops to improve their academic writing (81–82).

Despite these well-conceived and well-intentioned measures, by 1990 the number of incoming students to the Cal State system in need of English remediation had climbed to 45 percent. California continued to pour resources and energy into a variety of programs to solve “the remediation problem” before students arrived on its campuses, but by 1997 the number had climbed once again—to 47 percent of new students. In this same year, the Cal State Board of Trustees enacted new initiatives designed to reduce the number of students needing remediation to 10 percent by 2007 (83). They also imposed a one-year limit on the time students could take to complete remedial courses in English and mathematics. Those who failed to meet this limit would be “disenrolled” and required to complete the requisite courses at a community college before returning to the Cal State system (83). Despite these measures, in 2007, the year when it was hoped only 10 percent of new students would require remediation, the percentage of students who needed remediation after enrolling at Cal State remained at 46.2 percent (96).

Goen-Salter outlines this somewhat discouraging history of attempts to eliminate the need for remediation in order to highlight the success of the Integrated Reading/Writing Program (IRW) developed at her own campus, San Francisco State University. This program, which currently enrolls more than 1,000 students each year, provides integrated support in both reading and writing and enables students to complete the required English remediation as well as first-year composition in their first year on campus. The success of the IRW Program strengthens Goen-Salter's central argument that college is the appropriate place to help students develop the academic literacy required in today's society:

To perform its democratic function, basic writing sits not at the point of exit from high school, but at the *entry* point to higher

education. Historically, basic writing has served to initiate students to the discourses of the academic community, which may be far distant from and even alien to those of their home communities. But basic writing doesn't just initiate students to a more privileged language; it also offers them the opportunity and instructional practice to critically reflect on a variety of discourses, of home, school, work and the more specific public discourses of the media, the law, the health care system, and even of the college writing classroom itself. (98)

It is appropriate to invoke the ideals of a democracy in defending the notion that college should be the place to help students master the various discourses they will need in our increasingly complex society. This, of course, was the central argument that fueled demands for open admissions in the late 1960s. And there are signs that, in the years to come, enrollment in American colleges and universities will increase dramatically to accommodate growing numbers of nontraditional students, many of whom are likely to be judged “underprepared” for college-level writing.

One development that will undoubtedly increase the size of the college population—and also the need for remedial support—is the new GI bill passed in May 2008. Under this law, veterans who completed at least three years of active-duty service in the U.S. military after September 10, 2001, are eligible to receive thirty-six months of full tuition at public institutions of higher education in their states (for specific details on the new law, see “GI Bill 2008: Frequently Asked Questions”). The greatly expanded availability of educational funding for veterans will result in large increases in college enrollments. And because of the demographics of the U.S. military, many of these new students will be first-generation college students who have been out of school for years—a group that has historically needed basic writing or other types of remediation to succeed in college.

Another indicator of the likelihood of a growing need for remediation is the Obama administration's commitment to increasing the percentage of Americans attending college. In February 2009 in his first address to a joint session of Congress, President Barack Obama pointed out that 75 percent of present-day jobs require more than a high school education but that only slightly more than half of all Americans actually graduate from high school. Obama expressed the hope that by 2020 the United States would have the highest percentage of college graduates of any country in the world, and he asked “every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher

education or career training” at a four-year college, a community college, or a vocational program or apprenticeship (“Address”). In his first major education address (March 10, 2009), Obama pledged increased support for higher education, and his proposed 2009 budget included substantial increases in federal Pell grants as well as a tuition tax credit for students from working families (“Remarks”). The stimulus law that Obama signed in February 2009 acknowledges “the remediation problem” and requires states that receive stabilization money to improve high school courses and testing in order to reduce the number of students who need remedial courses in college (Dillon). But California’s failure to significantly reduce the need for remediation (described earlier in this article) suggests that in the future many students will continue to arrive at college in need of appropriate remedial programs.

As U.S. college enrollments increase significantly among veterans and nontraditional students, the need for basic writing is also likely to increase, as it did in the early days of open admissions. And there is an accumulating body of evidence that remedial programs—including basic writing—can have substantial benefits not only for the students enrolled in them but also for U.S. society at large.

Examining Costs and Benefits

Although coverage in the mainstream media has tended to focus on the supposed failings of remedial programs at the college level, many of these claims are not supported by well-designed research. One scholar who has taken a rigorous approach to the question of how remedial courses affect students is Bridget Terry Long, professor of education and economics at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In a 2005 article titled “The Remediation Debate: Are We Serving the Needs of Underprepared College Students?” (in *National Crosstalk*, an online publication of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education), Long described the motivation for her research:

While the policy debate about college remediation focuses on where it should be offered and who should pay for it, more careful thought should be given to what impact remediation has on students. Do the courses help remedial students perform better and remain in higher education longer? Is the investment in remedial programs worthwhile?

To address these questions in a reliable way, Long felt it was important to compare students with similar family backgrounds, high school programs and grades, and demographics—some of whom had taken remedial courses while others had not. She found a suitable student population in Ohio, where public colleges are allowed to set their own standards for assigning students to remedial courses. Looking at the results of remediation from this more nuanced perspective, Long found that “students in remediation have better educational outcomes than do students with similar backgrounds and preparation who do not take remedial courses.” She believes that curtailing remedial programs or insisting that all such support be provided in community colleges could have serious negative consequences: “Lower levels of education are associated with higher rates of unemployment, government dependency, crime and incarceration.” What may initially look like a cost-saving measure—eliminating remedial programs from American colleges and universities—could end up costing society much more in the long run.

Assessing the costs and benefits of open access to higher education has been the longstanding research interest of sociologist David Lavin. In studies conducted over many years, he has focused on the student population that entered the City University of New York under open admissions in the early 1970s, the same population that inspired Mina Shaughnessy to write *Errors and Expectations*. Lavin’s most recent book, coauthored with Paul Attewell and titled *Passing the Torch: Does Higher Education for the Disadvantaged Pay Off Across the Generations?* (2007), provides a fascinating glimpse of the lives of these students thirty years later. The book addresses two broad research questions: (1) when viewed over a long time span (thirty years), how have the students who entered CUNY under open admissions fared in terms of college graduation and later earning power? and (2) how have the educational achievements of the first generation affected their children’s educational careers? (Attewell and Lavin xvii). After extensive, multifaceted statistical analysis of data from a sample of about 2,000 of these former CUNY students along with a much larger national sample (for purposes of comparison), Attewell and Lavin reach conclusions that confirm the value of making higher education widely available:

A broad population of students, including those with poor high school preparation, enters the doors of public colleges. In response, these institutions have extended remedial courses—which were always offered to wealthy students in Ivy League colleges—to any

students who need them. Is that remediation a bad investment? Contrary to critics' contentions, our analyses suggest that remedial courses do not depress graduation rates for most students, and that remediation may reduce college dropout rates in the short term.

Taken as a whole, the evidence presented in this book indicates that the democratization of public higher education has not generated hordes of unemployable graduates or worthless degrees. Those who graduate with a college degree from public universities earn significantly more than high school graduates, net of background characteristics. For hundreds of thousands of underprivileged students, a college education is the first step up the ladder of social mobility and their college attendance generates an upward momentum for most of their children. (7)

One of the most surprising facts this study revealed was that most students who started college at CUNY during open admissions eventually earned a degree. When Attewell and Lavin examined the educational outcomes of 2,000 female students from this group over a long time period (thirty years), 71 percent had completed a degree, and three-quarters of those who earned a degree received a bachelor's degree (4-5). Obviously, studies that assess graduation rates by looking at a period of four or six years miss many of the students who eventually graduate from nonselective public institutions.

How does remediation—specifically basic writing—influence students' chances of graduation? Statistics reported in *Passing the Torch* show that students who take remedial courses do take longer to graduate (Attewell and Lavin 173). However, in recent studies that tease apart the effect of taking remedial courses from other influences such as family economic status and high school preparation, it appears “that most of the gap in graduation rates has little to do with taking remedial classes in college, but instead reflects pre-existing skill differences carried over from high school” (174).

In a related study titled “New Evidence on College Remediation” (Attewell et al. [2006]), there was evidence that community college students who took and passed remedial courses were more likely to graduate than were their peers who had not taken such courses (Attewell et al. 912; Attewell and Lavin 174). In fact, community college students who took and passed remedial writing were 13 percent more likely to graduate than students with similar high school backgrounds who did not take remedial writing (Attewell et al. 912). Four-year college students who took one or more

remedial courses had lower graduation rates, but students who took only remedial writing graduated at the same rate as students who took no remedial courses (Attewell et al. 909). The statistics on graduation rates from four-year schools are especially important if one considers the students' ethnicity. Nationwide, a large proportion of African-American and Hispanic students who eventually earned a BA took one or more remedial courses—50 percent for African-Americans and 34 percent for Hispanics. If these students had been denied admission to four-year colleges, a large number of the minority high school graduates from the class of 1992 would never have earned a bachelor's degree (Attewell and Lavin 173–74).

Attewell and Lavin conclude their discussion of remediation by emphasizing what is gained from providing remedial support: “Currently, college remediation functions both as a second-chance policy for poorly prepared students and as a form of institutional quality control that prevents students from graduating unless and until they demonstrate basic skills. Critics of remedial education seem to overlook the importance of remedial education for maintaining academic standards” (*Passing the Torch* 175). Attacks on remediation that have gained widespread attention in the media often ignore the subtleties revealed by thoughtful, statistically based research. A closer look reveals that this type of instruction has important benefits not only for individual students but also for the institutions they attend and the society of which they are a part.

The statistically based conclusions of scholars such as Bridget Terry Long and David Lavin and his colleagues are highly relevant to this discussion of the future of basic writing. In the face of attacks on remediation as a dangerous and costly experiment, views that were widely expressed in the 1990s and early 2000s, there is increasing evidence that, in the long run, providing access to higher education along with appropriate forms of academic support such as basic writing pays off for individuals and for society. This is not only an economic issue but also a moral one, a point that is stressed by Michelle Gibson and Deborah T. Meem in their description of the demise of University College, the open access arm of the University of Cincinnati:

The way a culture treats its non-elites serves as a benchmark of the culture's moral authority. Our country has sold the myth of the American Dream to generations of its poor and disenfranchised—a myth that has traditionally revolved around access to education.

If state support of higher education results in public universities providing less and less access to underprepared, working class, poor, or otherwise marginalized students, then our sense of who is able to pursue that dream—and who is not—is dramatically altered. (50)

In his 2009 book titled *Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us* (excerpted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*), Mike Rose also emphasizes the role of American colleges and universities in offering students a second chance and, thus, fulfilling the promises of our democracy. “It is terrible,” Rose acknowledges, “that so many students—especially those from poorer backgrounds—come to college unprepared.” But, he goes on:

colleges can’t fold their arms in a huff and try to pull away from the problem. Rather than marginalize remediation, they should invest more intellectual resources in it, making it as effective as it can be. The notion of a second chance, of building safety nets into a flawed system, offers a robust idea of education and learning: that we live in a system that acknowledges that people change, retool, grow, and need to return to old mistakes, or just to what is past and forgotten.

Remediation may be an unfortunate term for all this, as it carries with it the sense of disease, of a medical intervention. “Something that corrects an evil, a fault, or an error,” notes *The American Heritage Dictionary*. But when done well, remediation becomes a key mechanism in a democratic model of human development. (“Colleges Need to Re-Mediate Remediation” A76)

Despite Rose’s inspirational words encouraging colleges and universities to invest more of their financial and intellectual resources in effective remedial programs such as basic writing, the future of the field is far from certain. There is no way to determine whether research will lead to dramatic advances in pedagogy or further fragmentation. It is possible but by no means certain that current threats to basic writing may be trumped by future needs as economic forces reconfigure the political landscape. More powerful models for providing BW instruction may emerge, as well as more unified support for an under-supported field. Predictions are always dubious, particularly in a time of upheaval. So the fate of basic writing—and of basic writers—in the decades to come is an open question. What is not questionable is that the country needs an increasing number of well-educated,

literate citizens to compete in the economy of the twenty-first century. Past experience suggests that many students will continue to arrive at colleges and universities lacking the writing abilities and habits of thought needed to succeed in college and the workplace. Well-designed and carefully implemented basic writing programs can enhance these students' chances for success. But this will happen only if the concerted effort to displace these students from the nation's institutions of higher education is itself displaced. What is needed is a sustained national commitment to fully educate this vital but vulnerable student population. The fate of those who would need basic writing is tied to the larger society, a society that has to decide whether to do the right thing by them and expand its commitment or contract its own chances by curtailing educational opportunity.

Of course, a society never really decides to do anything. That falls to individuals, to their resolve and their initiative. The future of basic writing, like its past, will depend on how external forces combine with initiative from within, often resulting in moments of extraordinary leadership and fragile consensus as well as incremental progress and stunning setbacks. There are lessons to be learned from that history, some hard and some inspiring. Some may have lost their relevance with the passage of time. But some may make the past of basic writing a guide to building its future.

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